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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001687

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PINS SOCI VM RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN

SUBJECT: PROTESTANTS CLAIM MORE HARASSMENT

REF: A. HANOI 0551 B. Hanoi 0349
- C. HCMC 941

11. (U) Summary. Unconfirmed reports continue to indicate efforts by local authorities to pressure ethnic minority Protestants in some locations to renounce their faith. These reports claim at least one recent murder and more detentions. Some ethnic minority Protestants have reportedly also had to pay fines for illegal gatherings. While the religious life of most believers in Vietnam, including Protestants, appears to be unaffected by any new efforts, authorities at least in the two sensitive Highland areas appear to have focused attention on what appear to them purely illegal actions outside the recognized Protestant structure. Interestingly, these efforts to not appear to be very successful. Septel will report on some refutations of such claims by Party officials in Hanoi and provincial officials in Lai Chau and Son La provinces. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Foreign correspondents recently provided Embassy with copies of letters and other accounts from Vietnamese Protestants detailing recent cases of harassment, detentions, and even murder among some ethnic minority Protestants. The journalists originally received these documents from Vietnamese Protestant sources, who could often not provide a firm indication whether they had any personal knowledge of the events detailed in these accounts or exactly how directly they had obtained the information. Neither the Embassy nor the journalists themselves can confirm the accuracy of these accounts, which are in Vietnamese.

Murders?

13. (U) "Chong," the ten year old son of Protestant leader Trang Phia of Hoi Cha hamlet, Muong Nhe village, Muong Nhe District, Lai Chau province, disappeared three days after Trang Phia and other church leaders had been told to leave the hamlet and go into the forest (no date given). Authorities initially refused requests by Trang Phia's wife to search for her son, but later took her to a site (which she had already searched) and produced Chong's body. According to this account, he had been murdered -- church members believe by a 35-year old Hmong at the behest of local authorities seeking to punish the father -- at another site and his body later moved by authorities. Appeals by church members to Hanoi authorities to investigate the case have not produced any results. Local authorities continue to pressure church members to leave the hamlet, although unsuccessfully.

14. (U) Another account related the already familiar case of Mua Bua Sinh (aka Mua Bua Senh) of Tin Toc hamlet, Phin Giang, Dien Bien Dong district, Lai Chau province. Mua Bua Sinh died on August 7, 2002; his family believes he had been beaten because of his Protestant faith.

Detentions

15. (U) Following the death of Mua Bua Sinh, his brother Mua Say So went to Hanoi to try to convince central authorities to investigate. According to this account, he was detained in May 2003, although it is not clear whether in Hanoi or Lai Chau.

16. (U) Mua A Chau and Thao A Tong, of Sin Ho district, Lai Chau, were reportedly detained on March 5 in Binh Lu, Lai Chau. Mua A Chau was accused of having "resisted a person performing an official act" in October 2002 when he had been detained for three days, after authorities found in his possession a number of appeals about religious freedom. The two were held in a detention center in Sin Ho district. Tong was released after 15 days, but was supposed to report to police on a daily basis. Chau apparently remains in detention (the date of the report was not given but was clearly sometime after May 31) and other prisoners "allowed" into his cell to beat him occasionally.

17. (U) Sung Van Dung, a Hmong Christian from Hoi Dac

hamlet, Pa Ham village, Muong Lay district, Lai Chau, was detained on March 8 after officials found Christian materials in his sack. He reportedly remains under detention in Muong Lay.

Renunciations

18. (U) On March 3, about 100 police and soldiers came to Xa Cat Village, Sin Ho District, Lai Chau province, to force Hmong Protestants to sign a statement renouncing their faith, claiming all evangelists were "false hands of the U.S." The report does not indicate whether the Protestants complied.

19. (U) On March 2, police came to Che La village, Xin Man district, Ha Giang province to force families to sign a "commitment" not to listen to, believe, or spread illegal religions; not to organize illegal gatherings; and not to abandon ancestor shrines. According to the report, anyone who did not sign was arrested, but the report does not indicate how many, if any, complied. Whoever signed was supposed to be given some financial and other assistance by authorities, the report claimed, without indicating how many benefited from this offer.

10. (U) A Yen, an ethnic Coi-dong from from Dak Ring village, Cam Long district, Kontum province, was beaten by police who were trying to force him to renounce his faith on May 8.

Fines

11. (U) The materials also include copies of two receipts for fines (of 100,000 VND -- USD7 -- and 200,000 VND -- USD 14) paid by individuals in Dak Lak province for having organized "illegal Protestant gatherings."

Comment

12. (SBU) The religious life of most Vietnamese believers, including Protestants, appears to be free from any official pressure to recant; as long as they confine their religious activities to their own homes or within one of the recognized religious structures, they can practice their faith without noticeable interference. (The leadership structure and even the composition of the clergy remain under the supervision of the State and Party, however.) Even many house churches usually also operate with virtual impunity at most times. Authorities nonetheless view all other religious activities, especially evangelism, as illegal. At least in the sensitive Central and Northwest Highland areas, officials have tried to convince ethnic minorities to abandon such "illegal" practices; it appears increasingly likely that they were not doing so at their own initiative but rather as part of a larger drive to ensure that all religious activities fit into one of the CPV/GVN's boxes. With a few very regrettable exceptions, these efforts appear to have been non-violent, if still often coercive. Interestingly, however, it does not yet appear that these efforts have been on the whole successful. Most knowledgeable observers would confirm the continued spread of Protestantism among ethnic minorities in these areas despite pressures to conform and even occasional harassment, another sign of the dwindling power of the Party and State over individual lives. Septel will provide comments from Party officials in Hanoi and refutation of these allegations by provincial authorities in Lai Chau and Son La provinces.

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